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The "Balance of Power" System

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THE "BALANCE OF POWER" SYSTEM IN EUROPE, 1815-1871

Diplomacy in keeping with the balance of power system can be dangerous if the historical model of the 19th century is pressed too hard for analogies or lessons. Furthermore, it is important to impress upon contemporary statesmen the utility of alliances for mutual restraint, rather than security, and the value to the world of great powers having rivals upon whom they depend—powers they dare never fully trust, but whom they cannot finally do without.

An article
by
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Despite the significant role it played in the history of 19th century Europe, the balance of power is theoretically simple: Whenever a multistate system arises in a given area, that is, whenever you have a number of independent states in close proximity and frequent contact, the best way both to prevent violent conflict and to protect states' individual independence and security is to work for an equilibrium of power. How such a balance is initially achieved depends on historical circumstances—by postwar settlements, by peaceful territorial arrangements, by using a principle of compensation so that whenever any one state gains territory, others are similarly compensated, and so on. Once established, the balance of power must be actively maintained by member states; they must refrain from dangerous, unbalancing, unilateral gains themselves and present a common front against states which do threaten the balance. The deterrent power of the system lies in this threat of a coalition against a would-be aggressor or dominating power.

The theory is inherently plausible and attractive, almost self-evident. It is virtually impossible for statesmen and theorists to consider conflicts of power in international relations without coming to terms with some sort of balancing procedure—checking power with countervailing power. Indeed, the historical precedent for balance of power reaches back at least to the works of Thucydides where the Peloponnesian Wars are explained as being fought to establish the proper balance of power in

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ancient Greece. Moreover, 19th century statesmen and publicists plainly thought and acted in terms of balance of power. Edmund Burke, Friedrich von Gentz, and other influential thinkers were balance of power theorists; almost every statesman used balance of power slogans and evidently believed them.

There is still another reason why balance of power doctrine and practice seem particularly appropriate to the 19th century. It was, in a certain sense, a British idea in the British century. Balance of power ideas for establishing peace and stability in international relations clearly resemble and fit in with other major 19th century ideas for achieving peace, progress, and prosperity in domestic affairs. These were the doctrines of free trade in economics and liberal constitutionalism in government. Each of these doctrines assumes that competition per se is a good, freedom-bearing, healthy thing, whether it is competition among states, among businessmen and entrepreneurs, or among political parties and ideas—so long as the competition is kept in balance, without domination, monopoly, or undue restrictions on freedom. Balance is the key to security and progress everywhere—a balance of state power in Europe; a balance of political power between monarch, parliament, and people in civil government; and a balance of economic power and wealth between manufacturers, workers, and traders through free trade, the natural balancer. Britain was the chief exponent of all these doctrines, and since she was the richest, most progressive, and most stable great power in Europe—the model and inspiration for most liberal reformers—her ideas, including those of balance of power, enjoyed special weight and prestige. In addition, Britain conceived herself as playing a special role in the European balance of power, free from those special interests and ambitions for which other powers might sacrifice the balance. Her only interest was the preservation of the balance, and this disinterested objectivity plus her maritime supremacy and insular security, made Britain especially suited to be the holder and guardian of the concept.

Both balance of power doctrine and practice have value. Obviously, equilibrium is desirable, clearly preferable to empire or hegemony. Moreover, but for certain exceptions and qualifications which I will not take up here, balance of power practices do help to maintain the independence of the various states within the system. Since the strongest impulse in statecraft seems to be toward maintaining state independence, this makes balance of power doctrine and practice very attractive.

Unfortunately, the balance of power is less easily defined as an effective *peacekeeping* mechanism. First, the conditions of the system are very vague, subject to conflicting definitions and understandings. M.S. Anderson, an eminent British historian, remarks that the term "balance of power" often served no other purpose in 18th century British usage than to conceal an absence of thought.[1] One could say the same for the 19th and 20th centuries and for other countries besides Britain. The very fact that statesmen constantly talked about the European balance, using it to justify everything they did, makes the historian question whether it was anything more than a handy catch phrase. Martin Wight, another British scholar, concludes from a study of the actual uses of the term by statesmen and scholars that it had nine distinct meanings including the exact opposite of its normal meaning.[2] This would lead one to conclude that it is quite difficult to pin down the nature of balance of power policies and practices. Morton Kaplan, a political scientist, has drawn up six rules, or requirements, of the balance of power system, but as other scholars such as Raymond Aron have pointed out, they all amount to little

more than saying that one ought to preserve a balance, which is not very helpful.[3] Thus the term "balance of power" does not seem useful either as a tool for analysis or a guide for policy.

More serious still, balance of power practice may be inherently self-contradictory. That is, in practice pure balance of power politics may tend to destabilize rather than stabilize an existing equilibrium. Several factors may contribute to this. First, any balance of power system requires that member states be able and willing to form a blocking coalition against an aggressor. Further, if the system is to be stable, the blocking coalition must remain a strict blocking coalition and not proceed to become aggressive or dominant itself. Yet, as W.H. Riker has shown, the natural, almost irresistible goal of politics–domestic and international alike–is to form winning coalitions. Hence any successful blocking coalition will be very strongly tempted to go beyond frustrating the alleged aggressor to win political or military victories, thereby itself threatening the balance.[4] Historical evidence suggests that coalitions quite often succumb to this temptation.

A related problem is the tendency of pure balance of power politics to promote dangerous confrontations rather than détente or entente. A successful balance of power system requires the early detection of a threat and prompt preparation to meet it, a sort of diplomatic early warning system. What this means, in theory at least, is that its members must be ready to act before a threat becomes obvious or is in the process of being carried out. This requirement does two things. It encourages an aggressor to prepare a surprise lightning move to upset the balance of power before a blocking coalition can be formed (historical examples from Louis XIV to Hitler demonstrate precisely this calculation), and it encourages other powers to confront and challenge supposed aggressors or hegemonic aspirants when their dangerous purposes are only suspected, and are sure to be hotly denied–leading to a dangerous and perhaps unnecessary confrontation.

Furthermore, pure balance of power politics tends to promote, even to require, preventive and preemptive wars. One of the balance of power rules Kaplan cites is that actors must fight rather than allow the system to be overthrown or turned into empire or hegemony. But this clearly implies that if a statesman can recognize in the normal, expected course of events the growth of certain states and the decline of others, he must also see that the existing balance will be destroyed. Therefore, he must be willing to avert this outcome by preventive war, if necessary. To illustrate, prior to World War I, Germany complained that she was being encircled and threatened by the Triple Entente. The entente powers denied it and accused Germany of plotting to break up their purely defensive alignment. Which side was more correct makes no difference here. The point is that if the entente powers had good reason to believe that Germany aspired to dominate the Continent, they would have to form a blocking coalition encircling her, and if Germany had reason to believe that the entente powers were encircling and menacing her, she would have to try to break up the coalition or break through it. Thus this confrontation, so obviously dangerous, can be seen as a necessary, legitimate outcome of balance of power politics. One can go further. A.J.P. Taylor claims that the inherent dynamism of Germany was such before 1914 that had she merely remained calm, waited, and continued her peaceful economic development, she soon would have become dominant on the Continent without war.[5] I consider this prognosis incorrect. But suppose it were correct or the entente powers believed it correct; the obvious conclusion, on

balance of power principles, would be that they would have to launch a preventive war against Germany before she reached that commanding position. Or suppose, instead, that the position of Germany and her ally Austria-Hungary before 1914 was growing steadily weaker relative to that of their opponents and that in a few years the entente powers would be in a dominant position (which was what both entente statesmen and those of Germany and Austria tended to believe in 1914). Then Germany and Austria, on balance of power principles, would have to launch a preventive war to restore and secure the balance. Thus the preventive war gamble of these powers in July 1914, their attempt to regain a lost position of strength by violence, which set off World War I, becomes a necessary and justified move in balance politics.

Clear evidence of the destabilizing trend in pure balance of power politics, its tendency to promote and escalate conflict, is found even more in the 18th century, one dominated by the balance of power. Some scholars have viewed the 18th century balance of power as a moderating influence which helped to limit war, to moderate state goals, to make alliances restricted, temporary, and flexible, and in general to promote rational conduct in international relations. The fact is that 18th century wars of the European powers were frequent, long in duration, great in extent, and very exhausting. Indeed, most great powers in Europe were at war more years than they were at peace, fought as hard as the reigning military technology and their resources allowed, and strove just as desperately for survival or just as ardently for smashing victory as powers have in any other age. Neither were the aims of international politics limited or moderate. It was common practice to create alliances and carry on wars for the partition and destruction of major states. Poland, the Ottoman Empire, Sweden, Prussia, the Austrian Empire, Spain, the French overseas empire, and other states and territories were all the victims of such intended or actual partitions. The system, moreover, did not tend to settle down into an increasingly stable balance but was clearly imbalanced, unstable, and headed for a crash even before the French Revolution in 1789.[6]

One therefore must find something besides the balance of power to account for the relative peace and stability of the 19th century, especially 1815-1848. This age was unusual not merely for the absence of major conflicts, but also for its positive accomplishments in international relations. Dangerous questions were settled and conflict avoided over issues that in almost any decade of previous centuries would have brought on war. We must remember that peace is caused, just as wars are caused. Often it seems to be tacitly assumed that peace is the normal condition in international relations and that only wars or other overt conflicts need to be accounted for as deviations from the norm. One can just as easily make an opposite case. In the European arena, conflict of interests and purposes is the norm and violent conflict the expected means of resolving them. No one should be puzzled by the fact that various European states fought more or less continuously from the 15th through the 18th centuries over the Low Countries, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the Near East. This is normal. What needs explaining is the phenomena of the 19th century: the fact that the great powers, despite grave crises and serious differences of opinion, cooperated to solve the Belgian and Swiss questions without even approaching war; the fact that revolutions in Italy and Poland failed to cause war between the powers, even though rivalries still existed there; the fact that all five great powers joined to save the Ottoman Empire from collapse, none of them seizing any of its territory for

themselves. These facts need explaining, and balance of power alone does not provide the answer.

The actual peacekeeping system, though based on a balance of power, had elements built onto it which tended to modify potential conflict. The first of these elements was the prevailing spirit of pacific conservatism. All the states of Europe in 1815 save Switzerland were monarchies, mostly absolute monarchies. All were territorially satisfied, even defeated France. All were afraid of war and revolution, taught by bitter experience that these could overthrow not only individual thrones and kingdoms but the whole social order. Virtually all the statesmen belonged to a single international aristocratic elite, sharing the same conservative ideology and interests. Even the peoples of Europe were in a conservative mood—tired of war, taxes, conscription, and forceful change, mostly not yet politicized, nationally conscious, or socially alienated; by and large, content to be ruled by throne and altar. Hence there prevailed for a time an almost unexampled atmosphere of restraint, cooperation, desire to avoid war, and determination not to upset the status quo. Metternich used to say that Emperor Francis of Austria was so devoted to the existing treaties that if any power tried to get Austria to accept one village beyond them, Austria would declare war on that power. Hyperbole, no doubt, but the underlying sentiment was genuine enough.

The trouble is that such a spirit of peaceful conservatism cannot last. Peoples and rulers soon become restless and bored, lose their fear of revolt, regain the lust for adventure, revive the old issues and raise new ones. By itself this conservative spirit would hardly have lasted or preserved the peace more than a decade, which was all that Gentz and others expected. But something was created to institutionalize and perpetuate this conservative spirit, something called the Concert of Powers, the Concert of Europe, or simply the Concert system—the second element added to the basic balance of power model. The Concert was not a supranational organization like the U.N. or even an organized system of international conferences, but rather a set of rules, understandings, and practices designed to enable the great powers to cooperate to control European politics, settle major problems, and, above all, avoid great-power conflicts. The Concert system proved far more durable than the general spirit of conservative solidarity, and although overthrown in mid-century, it was revived in a new form after 1871 and continued to function, though increasingly ineffectively, right down to 1914.

Essentially the Concert system established the great powers (the distinction between great and lesser powers was laid down at the Congress of Vienna) as a Directory of Europe. They alone decided great European questions; the other states could be heard but not vote. All significant European questions had to be decided in great-power concert, by agreed-upon means, generally through diplomatic conferences or congresses. The great virtues of this system were that it provided effective machinery and rules for settling dangerous questions and, even more important, enabled compromises to be secretly worked out between rival great-power interests behind a facade of great-power harmony and unity. Though the powers might line up against each other inside the Concert, the outcome would always be presented to the outside world as a unanimous solution, thus saving the face and prestige even of the powers who might actually have lost. Thus the Concert system served to avoid the confrontations, challenges, and humiliations which pure balance of power politics promoted. This was vital for whatever the deep-rooted causes of war may be, the most common immediate causes or

occasions for war are such challenges to a state's national honor or prestige. A prime diplomatic watchword has always been: "You must not play small tricks on great powers," and the first and great commandment of Concert politics was, "Do not seek to challenge or humiliate another great power."

The Concert system undoubtedly did much to keep Europe peaceful. Some scholars, including myself, have credited it with the chief role in European peacekeeping in the 19th century.[7] Yet there is a problem with emphasizing the Concert as the heart of the system: though it was useful and durable, it had no coercive power of itself. A state, if sufficiently determined and powerful, could defy the other participants and get away with it. Once successfully defied, either by great powers or, even worse, by smaller ones, the Concert would tend to lose its moral authority and effectiveness, and states would revert to power-political methods to preserve their interests. The state which most directly destroyed the Concert both in 1859 and in 1914 was Austria-Hungary, even though she had usually been the power most loyal to the Concert and most in need of the Concert system to uphold her great power status. Why then did she wreck it? Because in both instances she became convinced that the Concert system was only being used to isolate her, wreck her position, and force intolerable sacrifices upon her; therefore, it was better to overthrow it.

Thus, even the Concert system does not suffice to explain peace. A third element was an "independent center" for Europe. For centuries, Germany and Italy had represented power vacuums, the continual arena of great-power struggles. In 1815 Germany and Italy were organized into an independent center for Europe. Exactly how this was done—by means of a loose confederation of German states with Austria as president and by Austrian leadership in Italy—is not so important as that it was done. This crucial cockpit of Europe was now made strong enough to escape the domination of the flank powers without the cohesion or power to menace its neighbors. To be sure, this system worked only until Italian nationalism created the Italian question, and the German great powers, Prussia and Austria, themselves fell out over Germany. Indeed, the eruption of wars in the 1850's and 1860's over Central Europe reinforces the thesis that an independent center was invaluable for European peace. When that center fell apart, war became inevitable, and before order and stability could return to Europe, an independent center in some shape had to be restored.

These three elements I have mentioned are all widely recognized. A fourth, perhaps the most important of all in making the 19th century system stable, is at the same time the one most easily overlooked and misunderstood: the "Holy Alliance." This alliance does not refer to the treaty of September 1815, sponsored by Tsar Alexander I of Russia in which he hoped to inaugurate a new era of peace and brotherhood among men (a treaty which most of the other states of Europe publicly signed and privately laughed at), but rather the actual alliance between the three so-called Eastern Powers—Austria, Prussia, and Russia. This relationship was based on combined rivalry and jealousy on the one hand and friendship and support on the other. This combination of mutual dependence and mutual suspicion made the Holy Alliance an outstanding example of what diplomats call a *pactum de contrahendo*—an alliance calling for restraint. All alliances are in some measure *pacta de contrahendo*. Every power which enters into an alliance with another wants not only to gain that power's help in case of need, but also seeks to exercise a greater influence over his partner's policy and to restrain him from using the alliance for illegitimate

or dangerous ends. But the Holy Alliance was the very model of a *pactum de contrahendo*, tying these three powers so closely to each other, so entangling them in simultaneous rivalry and dependence that none, so long as this relationship lasted, was able to break loose either into open aggression or into a clear bid for mastery in Europe.

It is easy to identify the bases for this relationship. All these powers wanted to present a solid monarchical front against revolution, liberalism, and nationalism. The latter was obviously the most critical danger for Austria with her 11 major nationalities, but Russia was also a multinational state only 50 percent Great Russian, and Prussia had a large, troublesome Polish minority. This points to the most concrete shared interest of the three powers—hold down the Poles and prevent the resurrection of a Polish national state. They also feared social unrest; all of them had a peasant problem of sorts, by far the worst was in Russia. All had religious tensions, which we tend to underrate but which were as serious as nationality problems in the early 19th century. Prussia was split between Catholics and Lutherans; Russia had substantial Muslim, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Old Believer, and Uniate minorities. Austria contained sizable Protestant and Orthodox groups; all had Jewish minorities.

Had shared conservative or reactionary social-political aims been the sole basis for the Holy Alliance, it might have constituted the great menace to European peace that many in the West thought it was; these aims might have led the three powers into dangerous antirevolutionary crusades and into a war with France or Britain. However, at the same time the power-political, balance of power aspects of their relationship cut in other directions. Each of these three powers saw the other two as potential or actual rivals, even at times as enemies. At the same time, each of them had other potential or actual rivals and enemies against whom he needed the help of the other two. Thus each of these Eastern powers, from a power-political standpoint, was compelled constantly to be on guard against the other two as its opponents while retaining them as friends. For Austria one great challenge came from France, mainly in Italy; to meet this she needed Russian and Prussian support. But, at the same time, Austria was potentially menaced by Russia in southeast Europe and by Prussia in Germany, and most of all by a possible Russo-Prussian alliance against her. Russia, though more secure than her partners, felt a threat from the Western Powers, Britain and France, a threat of ideological penetration and subversion as much as direct attack. For this reason she wanted Austria and Prussia on her side as a barrier. The great danger was that Prussia and Austria themselves might become liberal or revolutionary and join the West in an anti-Russian coalition. But Austria was also Russia's rival in southeast Europe, and if either Prussia or Austria or both of them together ever united Germany into one great power, Russia would be directly and gravely threatened. As for Prussia, she was the weakest of the great powers and saw dangers and enemies in every direction.

Not only can historians in retrospect understand the Holy Alliance relationship as an ideal *pactum de contrahendo*, the statesmen of the time did also and often deliberately use it as such. The Austro-Prussian relationship in Germany offers a fine illustration. Metternich treated the Prussians as junior partners in Germany, let them in on all decisions, but, at the same time, watched them carefully and warned the other German states against possible Prussian ambitions. Even after the revolutions of 1848-1849, when Prussia made a bid to unite Germany and lead it without Austria, thus bringing the Austro-Prussian rivalry out into the open and

taking them to the brink of war in 1850, the Holy Alliance relationship continued to act as a deterrent. It is often claimed that after Metternich's fall in 1848, Austria abandoned her partnership with Prussia and under Prince Schwarzenberg's leadership set out to create a great Central European empire of 70 millions under Austrian rule. This is not true. Schwarzenberg, though more of a fighter than Metternich, still looked on Prussia as simultaneously a dangerous rival and a necessary ally against revolution. The 70-millions Reich was supposed to be an Austro-Prussian partnership. As for Prussia, once she was forced temporarily to abandon her plans to become the leader of Germany, or at least north Germany, she too came back to the Holy Alliance, sticking close to Austria, her worst enemy, in order to control Austrian policy. Prussia's Crimean War policy gives ample proof of this. A decade later, even Bismarck, with all his skill and unscrupulousness, found it very difficult to achieve a war with Austria which he considered necessary, in great part because of the web of restraints the Holy Alliance cast over Prussia, Austria, and the rest of Germany.

Many more examples could be cited of how the Holy Alliance worked and was consciously used as a *pactum de contrahendo*—in Austrian and Russian policy in the Near East, for example, where the two powers were rivals constantly watching each other for dangerous moves and at the same time allies cooperating to prevent revolution, save the Ottoman Empire, and preserve the status quo. Russia's policy of keeping Austria and Prussia from fighting over supremacy in Germany—but also trying to keep them from becoming too friendly, so that each would continue to need Russia—is again typical. One could point to the policy of all three powers in regard to intervention against revolutions between 1820 and 1850, where again the rival-ally relationship becomes very apparent. The spirit of Holy Alliance politics is best summed up in a maxim of a veteran Austrian diplomat, Count Ficquelmont: "Always resist Russia, without breaking with her."[8] In other words, always resist your ally while keeping him as your ally.

Why is this particular *pactum de contrahendo* so important? After all, it was not the only such relationship in the 19th century. The British consciously entered into their ententes with France in the 1830's and 1850's with the aim of controlling French policy; to some extent the French did likewise with Britain. George Canning supposed that he could control Russia through an alliance over the Greek question in 1825 (he turned out to be wrong); and Palmerston succeeded in guiding Russian policy by cooperation with her in the Near East in 1839-1841.

What makes the Holy Alliance so special, of paramount importance to peace is first, geography. The Holy Alliance covered the most crucial area of Europe. Wars outside Europe—colonial conflicts like the Afghan, Chinese, or Persian Wars or even a Near Eastern war—would not necessarily lead to a general European conflict or shake the European system. Even a war between England and France on one side and Russia on the other could be contained so long as the German powers did not enter in—witness the Crimean War. But a war between the three Eastern Powers, or any two of them, was bound to shake up or destroy the European system, even if such a war could be localized as was the Austro-Prussian War of 1866.

Furthermore, the Holy Alliance covered the area from which the major threats of continental hegemony might arise. Already by 1850, if not before, it was clear that only two powers could possibly dominate Europe, either singly or in combination: a united Germany and/or Russia. True, this is easier to see

now than it was then. At the time, France still seemed a major hegemonic threat. But, in fact, the balance already had been moving to the East in the 18th century. The wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon had represented, in a sense, France's last great effort to regain the dominant position she had enjoyed under Louis XIV, and with their failure France had lost her last chance to dominate the Continent. In Central and Eastern Europe lay the numbers, the broad territorial expanses, and the potential economic resources that would make possible a serious bid for European supremacy. By 1850 the population of France was about 35 million; of Germany and Austria combined, almost 70; of Russia, almost 60. Both Russia and Germany were growing rapidly in population while France was stagnating. In tying the great powers of Central and Eastern Europe into knots, the Holy Alliance was making the most important contribution to preventing such bids for continental hegemony as have wreaked havoc in the 20th century.

Finally, in Central and Eastern Europe lay the most dangerous explosive material for great national and racial conflicts. Here was an area containing the two largest ethnic groups in Europe, Germans and Russians, both historically inclined to expansion and conquest, both without clear frontiers, either natural or national ones. Here also was an area filled with other smaller peoples, already aware or becoming aware of their national identities, clamoring for their rights or independence, and led increasingly by men ready to turn to any power or exploit any conflict that would help their cause. In short, Central Europe was an area simply primed for trouble, apparently destined for a great struggle between Teuton and Slav for supremacy. If one seeks the basic cause of the two World Wars, it lies here. Everything else is hardly more than an elaboration on the main factor, the national, racial, and social composition of Central and Eastern Europe. If one asks the more important and interesting question, What caused the peace? What kept the struggle between Teuton and Slav from breaking out until 1914? The answer is, surely, the Holy Alliance. For if one sees that the three great powers in this area were each monarchical-conservative states, mixed in nationality, not wanting or daring to base their rule on nationalist appeals or slogans; if all three were forced to live together in combined rivalry and dependence in order to survive as they were; if, above all, between the main German power and the main Slav power there was a third power both German and Slav, but also neither mainly German nor mainly Slav, whose very existence depended on not letting the national and racial question arise either within its own boundaries or in Central and Eastern Europe as a whole; one has the ideal system for holding back Armageddon, preventing the great Teuton-Slav struggle from taking place.

Lest you think that I picture the Holy Alliance as something brought down from Mt. Sinai graven on tablets of stone, let me add that it carried a very heavy price tag. In terms of international peace and stability, it was doubtless good for Europe as a whole; but in terms of progress, justice, personal and national freedom, it was very bad for the peoples who had to live under it. One cannot therefore simply endorse the Holy Alliance and all its effects. Even peace is not the only good or an immutable good; peace can be tyrannical and war liberating. But there were other real beneficiaries of the Holy Alliance besides the rulers and privileged elites in Central and Eastern Europe who profited directly from it—the governments and peoples of Western Europe, especially Britain and France.

The Holy Alliance, by keeping the three Eastern Powers primarily

preoccupied with each other, kept Western Europe free from Eastern military and political pressure. The Holy Alliance, absurd though this sounds, made its absolutist, antirevolutionary members tolerate successful revolutions in France, Belgium, and Switzerland. Holy Alliance restraints on the Eastern Powers helped France very quickly to return to great power rank and influence (and even to make a bid for renewed hegemony in the 1850's and 1860's) and helped afford Britain her remarkable autonomy and influence in continental affairs. Britain's world position, of course, she owed to her empire, navy, and commerce; but also in continental questions she often could intervene and speak with a deciding voice, even though she had practically no land army to back up her wishes. (When Bismarck was asked during the Schleswig-Holstein crisis what he would do if a British army was landed on Prussia's Baltic Sea coast, he replied that he would order the police to arrest it.) The Holy Alliance even benefited British empire building. Russia, Britian's main world rival in the 19th century, could not turn her attention and energy mainly to the Near East, the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Far East, where her interests clashed with Britain's, so long as her eyes were primarily fixed on Prussia, Austria, the unsolved German question, and the dangers of European revolution. The fact that the Western Powers were unaware of these points and failed to recognize that the Holy Alliance represented for them a great unplanned and largely unalloyed boon is, I think, one of the most important and neglected facts in European international history.

To be sure, the Holy Alliance and the system which it helped sustain did break up in the 1850's and 1860's, and though reconstituted after a fashion in the 1870's and 1880's, it was never again quite the same. What accounts for this breakup? A part of the cause, perhaps the main underlying one, lay in long-range organic changes within the societies, economies, and political structures of these states, especially Prussia and Austria. The beginnings of industrialization, commercial progress, the rise of an educated prosperous middle class, the beginnings of worker class consciousness, the awakening of nationalism, the advance of liberal ideas—all these trends, culminating in and accelerated by the 1848 revolutions, tended to promote interallied rivalry while weakening the ties of mutual support and restraint.

More directly responsible for the midcentury breakdown of the European system was the Crimean War. Briefly, it put both the Concert of Europe and the Holy Alliance out of commission. The Western Powers, especially Britain, did the most to ruin the Concert by preventing Concert diplomacy from heading off the war. Instead, Britain promoted a confrontation with Russia, insisting upon either a decisive political victory or a military showdown. Moreover, the British pursued drastic war aims, attempting to destroy Russia's power and influence in the East for a generation and thereby frustrated Austria's efforts to promote an early, moderate peace settlement. Without such a settlement, restoration of the Concert was impossible. The breakup of the Holy Alliance, however, has always been blamed on Austria. She broke with Russia, supported the war aims of the Western powers, mobilized against Russia, allied with England and France, and finally forced Russia to accept defeat and to submit to what Russia considered humiliating peace terms. At the same time, Austria bludgeoned Prussia and the German states into going along with her dangerous policy, thereby alienating both her allies and initiating the isolation which led her to the disasters of 1859 and 1866. This accurately summarizes the impact and results of Austria's policy. The only

qualification is that the aims of Austria's Foreign Minister, Count Buol, were quite different. His goals were to control the war, ending it before it became revolutionary in its impact; to curb Russia, whose expansion he considered dangerous; and, by means of a friendly relationship between Austria and the Western Powers, to restore good relations between Austria and Russia on a basis of equality rather than the previous Russian domination. No doubt he made grave miscalculations in his strategic and tactical assessments, and Austria paid dearly for them; but the aims Buol pursued were not intrinsically incompatible with the essential Holy Alliance relationship.

At any rate, the Crimean War broke up both the Concert and the Holy Alliance. The succeeding wars of Italian unification in 1859 and 1860 completed their ruin and brought much of the Vienna treaty system of 1815 down with it. It was not Bismarck who destroyed the restraints of European diplomacy by his *Realpolitik*. When Louis Napoleon and Cavour finished their work in Italy, before Bismarck came to power in 1862, no restraints were left. The question was not one of preserving the European system, but of clearing away the wreckage and establishing something in its place. That Bismarck accomplished both these ends constitutes his great achievement and his failure. Austria was no longer able to lead Germany or manage Central Europe; from being a pillar of European peace, she had become its main problem. Austria and Prussia could no longer function as senior and junior partners running a German Confederation. Prussia had already surpassed Austria in power and far outstripped her in prosperity and efficiency; German needs could no longer be satisfied by the old unreformed Confederation, and it could not be reformed so long as the two great powers had not settled who was master in Germany. Besides, the breakdown of the Concert and the Vienna System had created real dangers for Prussia and Germany which called for a stronger Prussia and a more united Germany. What all this means is that despite the bad aspects of Bismarck's first two wars—the dangers of wider war and the damage done to Denmark, Austria, and other states—the outcome of 1866 can be viewed as a more or less inevitable one and about the best available solution.

It was not 1866, but 1870-71, that made Bismarck's solution to the German and European problems unstable. This is often said, and what is usually meant is that it was not harmful for Europe that Bismarck expelled Austria from Germany and unified Germany under Prussian leadership, but very harmful that he picked a quarrel with France, defeated her, annexed Alsace-Lorraine, and thereby created a permanent Franco-German enmity that eventually led to World War I. This is *not* the point at all. France can be faulted for starting a quarrel in 1870 as much as Germany. Moreover, the Franco-Prussian War and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine are greatly overrated as the basic causes of Franco-German enmity up to 1914. No doubt the annexation had serious consequences, but it was not the basic cause of French hostility toward Germany, any more than the Treaty of Versailles was the basic cause of German revanchism after 1919.

Instead, the main factor destabilizing the European system in 1871 was simply the further unification of Germany or, to describe the process more accurately, the destruction of South Germany's independence and the final expulsion of Austria from the German sphere. These results, which most observers at that time and since regarded as natural, inevitable, and even desirable, were in reality highly detrimental to European stability, virtually destroying the chances of restoring the European Concert and the Holy

Alliance on a solid basis. The settlement of 1866 had left the door open (in its provisions, if not in Bismarck's intentions) to a restoration of the essential Holy Alliance relationship. The Austro-Prussian Peace of Prague had made Prussia master of North Germany, but it left the South German states independent and did not exclude the possibility that Austria could once again play a role in Germany—the role of encouraging South German independence, preserving the status quo, and thus checking Prussia. This provided a chance for the old dualism and federalism in Germany to survive in a new form. Such an outcome would have preserved Russia's interest in keeping Germany and Central Europe from being dominated by one power and would have revived Russia's stake in the existence of Austria as a check on a too powerful Prussian-led Germany. Austria would still have looked to Prussia and the South German states for backup help against Russian encroachments in the East, and at the same time to Russia and France for support against Prussian expansion within Germany. The South German states, who clearly wanted to remain independent, would at least have hoped that Austria could help them stay that way. In short, the restraints that had operated on Austria when she was the leading German power could now be turned against Prussia; the essential relationship of mutual rivalry and dependence in Central and Eastern Europe, the old *pactum de contrahendo* of the Holy Alliance, could still have been revived.

The years 1870-1871 ruined this possibility. It made Prussia-Germany master of all of Germany and Central Europe. Austria-Hungary was pushed decisively toward southeast Europe, where she would be only a rival to Russia and no longer an asset to her. Austria, moreover, became dependent on Germany for her very survival and therefore could no longer effectively check German power or German policy, though she still tried. Germany was still obliged to live with Russia and Austria-Hungary as her neighbors, but was afflicted with a far greater burden of keeping them from fighting each other, now that Russia was Austria's major, almost sole, enemy and Austria was merely a rival and an obstacle to Russia. Bismarck saw the problem clearly and tried in every way he knew to meet it. It is fascinating to follow his efforts to manage the Austrian-Russian problem in the next 20 years—how he took up and discarded one expedient after another, each one more ingenious, artificial, and fragile than the last. For all his effort, however, a satisfactory solution escaped him, and his successors either gave up even trying to solve the problem or thought it no problem at all. As a result, Germany and the rest of Europe were ultimately entangled in all-out war.

Bismarck was a profoundly realistic, basically conservative statesman. He was fully conscious of the value of the Holy Alliance relationship for peace and after 1871 tried to restore it. Yet his own creation, the German Reich, in the last analysis made its restoration and functioning impossible. How does one explain this contradiction in Bismarck's policy? Many factors play a role, no doubt, but two are the most basic and revealing. One involved Bismarck's personality, the other his calculations. He was a combative, authoritarian leader with an intense drive to dominate. In politics he was completely unwilling to brook rivals within his sphere of authority. In domestic affairs he managed with difficulty to tolerate some opposition in Parliament; but no one, not even the King of Prussia and Emperor of Germany, dared cross him within the executive government he ran. In his conceptualization of Europe, Germany belonged in Prussia's sphere, and hence in his own. He could brook rivals and opposition in foreign policy outside Germany, but he could not stand having

rivals within it. Hence he hated Austria as he hated no other power, until he had defeated, displaced, and eventually excluded her completely from Germany. After that, Austria was a foreign power, and with foreign powers Bismarck could get along reasonably well. Thus Bismarck's personality and basic outlook forbade him to accept a fundamental requirement of the Holy Alliance, that no one power dominate Central Europe, that each power be restrained within its own sphere by another power at once friend and rival in that sphere.

In addition, Bismarck made a fundamental, though very plausible, miscalculation. He thought he could get Prussian control of all of "Little Germany" and Prussian domination of Central Europe. He believed he could get Europe to both accept and endorse his basic purpose in unifying Germany. Besides strengthening Prussia, this was, as he put it, a way to "unburden" Central Europe. The goal was to disentangle Germany from other states' quarrels; to prevent Germany from being used, as she often had been in recent decades, to help other states solve the Eastern question or to check Russia or to help Britain hold back France or to promote Austrian purposes on the lower Danube. He calculated that if he made Germany strong and independent enough that other powers would have to respect her and leave her alone, and if Germany at the same time proved by her conduct that she was satiated and peaceful, that the rest of Europe would accept the new Germany and settle down with her. The European powers might still quarrel elsewhere—Britain and France over Egypt or Africa, Britain and Russia over Central Asia, Austria and Russia over the Balkans—but Germany would refuse to be dragged in. By staying out she would keep war from becoming general and would be able to restore the European equilibrium.

This seems a natural, plausible, attractive scheme which should have worked. But it did not, and one can see why it could not. Germany could not stay out of other states' quarrels. Her geographical location and power position were too central for that, and the effects of other peoples' quarrels affected Germany too closely to be ignored, the Austro-Russian quarrel most of all. Worse still, a Germany so strong that she could not be dragged into questions she did not want to be involved in, a Germany strong enough to resist all possible pressures from both flanks was, *ipso facto*, a Germany too strong for her neighbors to be comfortable with, a Germany that could easily use the same strength which made her independent to make her dominant. Hence the other European powers in the long run could not simply be satisfied with Germany's assurances that she was sated and peace loving; in international relations, capacities count for more than intentions. The paradoxical fact is that, in the long run, Europe could feel safe with Germany, and Germany would be really safe within Europe only if Germany were not independent, not disentangled, not unburdened as Bismarck wanted to make her; only if Germany were restrained and protected within Central Europe by something like the old Holy Alliance, only if she shared power in Central and Eastern Europe with other powers who at once mutually supported and checked each other.

I do not contend that this story has a

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

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clear lesson for international relations today. History is still an indispensable teacher, but a dangerous one if misused or pressed too far for analogies and lessons. At the same time, I cannot help feeling that the 19th century European experience might well serve to impress upon contemporary statesmen the great usefulness of alliances not so much as instruments of power and security, but as devices of mutual restraint. It might illustrate the importance of seeing the international scene less in terms of mechanics and power than in terms of symbiosis and organic system—in terms, if you will, of ecology. Finally, it might help convince statesmen and peoples that it is immensely valuable to the world, perhaps even vital, for great powers to have rivals upon whom they are dependent; for them to be tied to other powers whom they dare never fully trust, but also whom they cannot finally do without.

NOTES

1. "Eighteenth-Century Theories of the Balance of Power," in Ragnhild Hatton and M.S. Anderson, eds., *Studies in Diplomatic History* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1970), p. 184.

2. "The Balance of Power," in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds., *Diplomatic Investigations* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), pp. 149-75. Cf. also Herbert Butterfield's essay with the same title, pp. 132-48; and Ernst B. Haas, "The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept or Propaganda," *World Politics*, October 1952-July 1953, vol. V, pp. 442-77.

3. Morton A. Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1957), pp. 22-36; Raymond Aron, *Peace and War* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 128-32.

4. *The Logic of Political Coalitions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), especially pp. 168-87.

5. Alan J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), chap. XXII.

6. The War of American Independence had not righted the balance in the West between Britain and France, as the French had hoped, but further weakened France. In the East the partition of Poland was underway; the Eastern question had flared up into a war that had spread to the Baltic as well; Prussia was forming alliances to intervene for grandiose expansionist goals; and, in general, the situation was out of control.

7. Richard A. Roseerance, *Action and Reaction in World Politics* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962); P.W. Schroeder, *Austria, Great Britain and the Crimean War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), chap. 16.

8. Quoted in Waltraud Heindl, *Graff Buol-Schauenstein in St. Petersburg and London 1848-1852* (Vienna: Bohlau, 1970), p. 78.

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